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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 4500
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RUEHTN/AMCONSUL CAPE TOWN 5613
RUEH DU/AMCONSUL DURBAN 9829
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SUBJECT: POLICE UNABLE TO CONTROL XENOPHOBIC AND ETHNIC
VIOLENCE

REF: PRETORIA 644

11. (SBU) SUMMARY. Though South Africans have perpetrated sporadic, but infrequent xenophobic attacks throughout the country in recent years, the frequency and intensity of the attacks in the past several weeks against not only foreigners, but also those of different South African ethnicities, has escalated to dramatic proportions. The most recent attacks over the past week started in the impoverished township of Alexandra, just outside the capitol, and spread to neighboring townships and informal settlements, as well as the Johannesburg central business district. Thus far, 12 people have been murdered, at least two of whom were South African. While there have been no reports of Americans being targeted, these incidents of mob violence have sprung up quickly and proven difficult for local authorities to control. The violence has many complex origins, and post continues to investigate, but at base, the current violent outbreaks against all foreigners, not just Zimbabweans, seem to be rooted in the SAG's inability to deliver services, especially housing; unrealized expectations post apartheid; unequal distribution of income and wealth; and high unemployment. END SUMMARY.

VIOLENCE ENGULFS JOHANNESBURG

12. (SBU) The front page of every newspaper in South Africa on 19 May showed horrific images of "alleged foreigners" being burnt alive (with bystanders laughing), being beaten by angry mobs, or fleeing their burning shacks during the weekend (19-20 May). The violence, which started in Alexandra and Diepsloot townships last week, spread throughout Gauteng province this weekend to at least eight other townships and even the central business district of Johannesburg. According to press accounts, at least 12 people were murdered (though the toll is expected to rise) and hundreds more were beaten, stabbed, or shot. Criminal elements are also taking advantage of the situation, with widespread looting taking place. Police have arrested over 200 people on charges including murder, attempted murder, rape, public violence, and robbery.

13. (SBU) The angry mobs appeared unapologetic for their actions. Press reports note that mobs walked around townships or stopped vehicles looking for "foreigners" to attack. Police struggled to control the violence and had to withdraw several times after being taunted and pelted with rocks and bricks. At times, police were forced to respond by

shooting rubber bullets into crowds in order to allow people to evacuate. At least one of the mobsters, whose victim was dragged into a police car before he was beaten to death, told the police, "These people must go. We do not want them here."

ETHNIC ANGLE TO VIOLENCE

¶4. (SBU) As with prior attacks (reftel), the violence does not appear solely xenophobic in nature, with South Africans being targeted as well. Numerous press reports note that in addition to Zimbabweans, Mozambicans, and Congolese, Tshivenda and Shangaan-speaking South Africans also were targeted. One press report alleges that at least one mob was purging all non-isizulu-speaking people from an area, saying "all we want here are Zulus." The nationality and ethnicity of victims has not been established, but at least two were South African.

VIOLENCE CENTERS AROUND LACK OF RESOURCES AND MISPERCEPTIONS

¶5. (SBU) PolAsst, who grew up in Alexandra, visited the township on 19 May and discovered that anti-foreign sentiment is widespread. Most people on the street told him that it's not that they do not want foreigners in South Africa, just not in Alexandra. They feel Alexandra is already one of the most poorly resourced townships in South Africa, and foreigners "are only adding to their problems."

¶6. (SBU) As was the case in Atteridgeville last month (reftel), there is intense jealousy and rivalry over housing and unemployment. There is also a misperception that foreigners commit most crimes in South Africa and are better treated by South African authorities. PolAsst was told the violence in Alexandra was sparked by a "foreigner" who was selling items outside a South African-owned business. The South African owner insisted he move, the foreigner refused, and violence broke out and spread. Numerous press reports also cite a widespread rumor that the SAG was giving Zimbabweans government houses before South Africans. It is widely known that some South Africans rent their government houses they no longer need to the highest bidder, whether they are South African or foreign, while other South Africans live in makeshift informal settlements for years on a waiting list for a government house.

¶7. (SBU) PolAsst received excellent cooperation from township authorities during his 19 May visit with Alexandra Police Commissioner Pharisa, as well as Superintendent Terreblance and 17 other policemen who answered every question PolAsst asked. (COMMENT: PolAsst's background growing up in Alexandra likely contributed to their willingness to answer questions. END COMMENT) According to Terreblanche, the violence was sparked by residents not wanting foreigners to take their jobs, houses, and business opportunities away from them. As an example, he mentioned that a South African day laborer asks for 100 rand (US \$13) a day, while foreigners will often work for 30 rand (US \$4) a day. Terreblanche said that residents have been complaining to the police for about nine months about foreigners, and when nothing happened, residents of Alexandra got fed up and took action themselves. Both Terreblanche and Pharisa also mentioned that the "tsotsi" element (South African thugs) has taken over and is behind most of the serious violence. Member of Parliament Obed Bapela also has publicly said that the majority of violence is being committed by young criminals "who were between one and six years old in 1994; they are clueless in terms of who we are, where we come from, and where we are going as a country."

GOVERNMENT AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

¶8. (SBU) Government spokesperson Themba Maseko publicly said "there is some form of orchestration to these attacks; they are not just criminal." Maseko also described the attacks as "crazy and inexplicable," blaming "somebody" who wants to take advantage of the declining mood in the country to destabilize South Africa. The SAG also has called in the "intelligence services" to further investigate who is behind the attacks, implying foreign governments intent on making South Africa look bad are to blame. Maseko also said the "lack of intelligence" on the issue has caused the police to be taken off-guard, deflecting criticism that police have been unable to contain the violence.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE LACKING, YET AGAIN

¶9. (SBU) Parliament held a special session on xenophobia on 16 May, with the ANC condemning the violence, arguing that refugees must be integrated into society. Both President Mbeki and ANC President Jacob Zuma have condemned the attacks in general. Mbeki announced he has set up a "panel" to look into the attacks. Zuma said he could not fathom how South Africans could attack foreigners when so many ANC members sought refuge in neighboring countries during apartheid. Interestingly, Director of the University of Witwatersrand Forced Migration Studies Program Loren Landau told PolOffs last month that he had tried in vain to reach out to Zuma's camp to get them to issue a statement against xenophobia. Zuma's camp declined, and Landau was told off the record that the reason was that many people close to Zuma are xenophobic. Landau believes that Zuma's populism, his promises to improve people's living conditions, and his nationalistic tendencies (as opposed to Mbeki's pan Africanist stance) may spell an unwillingness to act against xenophobia in real terms.

HUMANITARIAN CRISIS ALREADY HERE

¶10. (SBU) Doctors Without Borders' group spokesperson, Eric Goemaere, said the number of foreigners left destitute as a result of last week's violence, which the Red Cross estimates at around 3,000, constitutes a humanitarian crisis. Goemaere believes that efforts to argue otherwise just because the victims are not being housed in what the international community would define as a refugee camp are nothing more than semantics. "I have treated bullet wounds, beaten people, rape victims, and the people are terrified," he said.

COMMENT

¶11. (SBU) Xenophobia and ethnic tensions within South Africa have many complex origins and post continues to investigate current incidents and their causes. Inter-ethnic tensions may have been swept under the rug, but have never died. At base, the current violent outbreaks against all foreigners, not just Zimbabweans, seem to be rooted in the SAG's inability to deliver services, especially housing; unrealized expectations post-apartheid; unequal distribution of income and wealth; and high unemployment. However, instead of blaming the SAG or the ANC for not delivering what was promised during the struggle, people are misdirecting their anger at foreigners by spreading mistruths about them. While foreigners likely commit some crime, they do not commit the majority of crime in South Africa. Anecdotal evidence indicates they are not better treated by police. Refugee organizations repeatedly tell EmbOffs that foreigners are afraid of police because of how they have been treated in the past.

BOST